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FM AMEMBASSY BISHKEK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2683
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
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RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1544
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3596
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2989
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP
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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (GORKOWSKI)

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SENV KG
SUBJECT: LOSING PARADISE: KYRGYZ BIOSPHERE RESERVE

BISHKEK 00001061 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Ambassador visited Sary Chelek Biosphere Reserve in Jalalabad Oblast, once home to a number of species found only in the Central Asian mountains. Hunting, fishing, and grazing are officially prohibited, but years of official indifference have resulted in a biosphere reserve almost devoid of wildlife, but with abundant cattle. Locals have taken over the non-mountainous areas for grazing livestock. According to their supervisor, the Reserve's guards are infrequently paid, and will accept a bottle of vodka to overlook nearly any infraction. According to the local governor, Wahabism is spreading fast in Kyrgyzstan's South. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) In the company of the Korean and Pakistani Ambassadors, the Ambassador visited Sary Chelek Biosphere Reserve in Jalalabad Oblast. Designated a Biosphere Reserve in 1978, the Reserve once was home to a number of species found only in the Central Asian mountains. Now, unfortunately, although the emerald lake and snowy mountains provide a beautiful vista, the predominant features up close are smashed vodka bottles and cow patties: The only species that appear to be at home here are cattle and humans. The rules say the Reserve should be left in its natural state, with fallen trees left to rot. In practice, however, "natural state" is interpreted to mean "with lots of livestock grazing on it."

Voices From the Biosphere

¶3. (U) The Reserve has a staff of about 40, who both guard the park and offer to show tourists around. The first guard the Ambassador encountered, named Cosmos, had a Panglossian view of the park. Questioned about the herds of cattle thronging the park, Cosmos said that they were just passing through the Reserve on their way home from summer pastures, and would be gone in a few weeks. The vodka bottles similarly would disappear--Cosmos had just organized a group of environmentally-minded young people from Bishkek who were coming to clean up the park. The Reserve's director shared

Cosmos' sunny attitude--the Reserve was thriving, in his estimation.

14. (SBU) Later in her explorations, the Ambassador met the Reserve's senior guard, Jakshykbek (protect), who had been working at the Reserve since Soviet times. He painted a very different picture than his colleagues: Since independence, everything has gone downhill. The Reserve doesn't have any money, and the guards often do not get paid. Almost all the fish in the lakes are gone, and the boar population, and almost everything else, has been hunted to near-extinction. There are still a few snow leopards, but they survive only because it's too much trouble for hunters to get up to where they live.

15. (SBU) Cattle, however, are always abundant in the Reserve, Jakshykbek said. Since Kyrgyzstan's independence the restrictions imposed by the land's status as a biosphere reserve have lost all meaning. Local villagers treat the area as just another pasture.

16. (SBU) With surprising forthrightness, Jakshykbek painted his guards as rent-seekers rather than agents of conservation. When his guards come upon someone fishing, hunting, or doing anything else that disturbs the ecological integrity of the Reserve, they are supposed to take action. Instead, they normally take a bottle of vodka, and just walk away. Since they have a penchant for drinking the vodka immediately, Jakshykbek ruefully admitted that many of the smashed vodka bottles lining the lake shore were probably the responsibility of his guards, and not rampaging German hikers.

17. (U) The Ambassador spent the night at the only hotel facility near the park, a guest house constructed by an

BISHKEK 00001061 002.2 OF 002

international NGO in 2004, presumably with the general aim of increasing the local population's financial stake in maintaining Sary Chelek in its natural state. Five years later, the NGO has left Kyrgyzstan, and through some mechanism that no one could quite explain, the guest house is now reserved for use by government officials only. The local Akim (Regional governor) made an exception for the visiting Ambassador.

Unlimited Horses, but No Dogs

18. (SBU) The next day, the Ambassador met the local Akim, Talantbek Orozov, in Kerben, the capital of Aksy Region. Mentioning some of the problems she had seen at Sary Chelek, the Ambassador suggested that more hotels might be a way to generate revenue for both the locals and the Biosphere Reserve. Orozov acknowledged the Reserve's problems, but said that there was nothing he could do. The Reserve is controlled by the Agency for Forestry and Tourism, and they pay the salaries of the guards and select the Reserve's director, and they need to build the hotels.

19. (SBU) Orozov admitted that local families tended to treat the Reserve as a private pasture. He disclosed the policy he had developed to prevent overgrazing in the Reserve, clearly viewing it as Solomonic in its wisdom: Each family can graze no more than one cow and five sheep, but an unlimited number of horses, and, inscrutably, no dogs are allowed.

10. (SBU) Changing topics, the Akim said that Aksy was considered one of the most difficult regions in the country to govern. In 2002, Aksy was the site of a violent uprising inspired by the arrest of government opposition figure Azimbek Beknazarov, and the government continues to keep a wary eye on the region. Orozov said that Wahabists are rapidly spreading throughout Southern Kyrgyzstan, enabled by the construction of Saudi-funded mosques (now terminated in his Region), but as yet they did not pose a threat in Aksy.

¶11. (SBU) The Uzbek Government, however, is causing real problems, according to Orozov. Much of the border has not been officially delimited, and the Uzbek Government has recently begun digging a trench to establish their view of the border. Orozov said the trench has cut some 26 families off from the country in which they thought they lived. Orozov was careful to note that he had no problems with the five percent of Aksy's population who are ethnic Uzbeks. They are respected and well-treated, and classes are even taught in Uzbek for them in local schools.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The Soviets left behind a mixed legacy in Aksy. They recognized that Sary Chelek was worthy of protection, and while the Soviet Union lasted, that protection was worth something. But they also left behind a governance system that looks to the top, and not to the people, for marching orders, resulting in absurdities like local officials permanently reserving the only hotel in a tourist town for their visiting bosses.

GFOELLER